

AN EXCERPT FROM

## **The Ice Man**

By George Brandsberg

*Soaking wet in subzero cold and miles from shelter, rancher Hugh Murphy had little chance to survive. Here's the true story of a December day he would never forget.*

It all started on a sunny morning a few days after Christmas, 1963. Hugh Murphy had just bought a new four-wheel-drive truck he laughingly said was a Christmas present for himself.

Eager to try it out in the North Dakota Badlands where Hugh and his brother Jack, wintered their cattle, the 47-year-old bachelor set out for the pasture about thirty miles from Murphy Bros. ranch headquarters near the town of Killdeer.

They had a camp out there for cowhands. It included a cabin and a shed for horses. Hugh wheeled into camp after daybreak, planning to show off the new yellow truck to Lawrence "Fog Horn" Baker, a hired man who lived there.

But Fog was gone. Disappointed, Hugh shrugged and left. Minutes after leaving camp he got the truck stuck in a gully, but soon freed it with a pick and shovel and improvised enough of a road to move on. While this kind of obstacle might irritate some hands, it didn't particularly bother wiry five-foot-seven-inch Hugh.

As he bounced along the rough, dirt "cake trail," he noticed some heifers were missing. *Might as well go look for them*, he thought. *Fog might be down there.*

Hemmed in by clay banks, Hugh drove down to the shore of a frozen reservoir. He stopped the truck, got out and carefully inspected the ice. He judged it to be five or ten inches deep, plenty thick to support the lightweight truck. So he eased it out onto the ice and was soon breezing along the smooth, glassy surface. Although a little risky, this was the most practical way to carry on the search, he decided. He could scan a lot of country from the reservoir.

After traveling about five miles on the ice, Hugh decided to go just another half-mile to a ridge that jutted out into the reservoir. If he didn't see the missing animals by then, he'd turn back and took somewhere else.

Suddenly the little truck jolted to a halt when its front wheels broke the ice. With scraping sounds, it sank to its headlights and held there.

Hugh couldn't open the door on the driver's side. He reached over and tried the other door. Ice had jammed it, too.

When he tried to open the sliding windows so he could crawl out, both windows were frozen tight. *The only way out is through a window*, he thought. The idea of breaking a window on his new truck delayed him for only a moment. As he began to kick savagely at the unrelenting glass, the little truck slowly broke through the ice and sank toward the bottom of the reservoir twelve down.

Daylight faded into a murky yellow light. Hugh could hear precious air bubbling out. Frantically, he watched out the windows as the truck slowly sank. *Won't it ever stop falling?* he wondered.

With desperate kicks, he sent both feet smashing through the front panel of a sliding window. By then the cab was nearly flooded with icy water. Hugh quickly filled his lungs with air and wormed through the jagged opening in the window.

Once free, he shot upward with the help of air inside his winter clothing. He bumped against the bottom of the ice, trapped. Seeing a patch of light about five feet away, he made a couple of swimming strokes and popped into the open water.

Sputtering and coughing, Hugh grabbed for the edge of the ice. Then came terrifying thoughts:

*"No one knows where I am.*

*I'll be dead in a minute or two. .*

*No!* He shoved the panic back. "At least I'm gonna try."

He tried pulling himself up on his elbows to get his shoulders out of the icy water. The sleeves of his quilted jacket froze instantly to the ice. Inching up, he struggled onto the firm ice and away from the open water. Then he staggered to his feet.

“I’m alive!” Hugh shouted, just to make sure. Shaking violently from the cold, he looked around to see where he was. To the north he recognized Short Coulee, a big hole in the face of the bluffs along the river. He figured he must be five or six miles from camp.

Once when he was younger, Hugh was riding with neighbors when his horse fell into a washout, pinning him. The horse couldn’t get up, but Hugh knew the other men were near, so he started shouting for help. Before long, some of them rode up and freed him. It was cold that day, too, about 25 degrees below zero.

But this was different. Hugh knew it was pointless to yell for help because there was no one within miles. He normally circulated as far as 100 miles from ranch headquarters. So, if he didn’t come home that night, no one would think much of it. If he didn’t show up for two or three days, people might wonder where he was but they wouldn’t know where to start looking

The severe cold stabbed into his face and entire body. The tiny rivulets of water had turned to ice that crusted Hugh’s black hair, eyebrows and eyelashes.

He set out along the shore of the reservoir, avoiding the windswept ice. As he leaned into the wind, it stung his bare hands and face. He’d lost his mittens and winter cap in the water. After hurrying for nearly a mile; he remembered that his jacket had a light nylon hood on it. Reaching around, he pulled it over his head. That cut the wind.

The ground at the reservoir's shore was too rough to make good headway, so Hugh followed a trail up the face of the bluffs. His feet and hands were growing numb. It worried him.

“When I get to the top, I’ll be fine,” he told himself.

Hugh thought it must have been about 11 a.m. when he went through the ice. For more than an hour he had been wet and freezing. He had never suffered such pain before.

After an eternity, he topped the bluff, where the full force of north wind slammed into him and pene-

trated his bare hands and face, the cold hurt so bad that tears filled his eyes and he feared they would freeze shut.

Gradually a dull numbness softened the pain but slowed Hugh's progress, even though the path was almost level. After battling the wind, the cold and foot-deep snow for four miles, he wondered how much farther he could go.

Going back down the bluff was worse. The slope was so steep that if he fell and started rolling, he might tumble down hundreds of feet.

Hugh tried to think of something besides cold. He could see the big, warm ranch house full of holiday cheer and his brother's family of ten healthy children. Bachelor Hugh was their favorite uncle. He wondered if he'd ever see any of them again.

*"Only a mile or so, now,"* he told himself. The road started uphill, making it harder to limp along. Then he fell. Straining, he got halfway to his feet, slipped and tumbled into the snow. He couldn't move.

"Rest." The pain seemed to be fading. "Got to rest. Catch your breath. Ahh. That's better."

He closed his eyes for a second. In that instant he saw his frozen body lying in the snow. *"No,"* he whispered stubbornly. He tried to move. The cold and ice pressed down on him. "I've come this far. Just a little farther. *Have to try harder.*"

Nothing worked right any more. His shoulders were numb, his hips were stiff and he couldn't get to his feet. Forcing himself, he crawled a few feet and stopped to rest. Barely conscious, he prodded and wheedled himself again and again to keep moving when everything in him wanted to stop. Finally, he could see the cabin at camp in the distance. *"If I can just hang on a little longer,"* he said.

He grabbed at the doorknob and tumbled inside, too exhausted to shout the exultation that welled up in him. He tried to crawl into bed but was shivering so violently that he just sat on its edge until the shaking passed and he could regain control.

Incredibly, Hugh Murphy had walked seven miles over pitching Badlands in eight-degree-

below-zero cold and a wind. The trek took him five hours.

After changing clothes and warming-up, Hugh saddled a horse and rode off to ask a neighbor, Clyde Baker, to drive him back to the Murphy ranch. *My best present came a few days after Christmas*, Hugh thankfully thought to himself, urging the horse into an easy lope.

Later, he made it all sound so simple: “When the chips are down, you do what you have to, that’s all.”

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